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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the fundamental problem of individual inequalities in school success should be solved. Individual inequalities exist because present forms of schooling serve only a fraction of the different individuals in the population and because of the absurdity that precociousness in young children sets the standard for school success. Inequalities persist because of neglect--the failure to appreciate the developmental strength and the idiosyncracies of children. Far too large a proportion of the population fail in schools: well over two-thirds are white students from middle class homes. Age and idiosyncrasy, two obvious sources of variation in academic performance, should be exploited, not neglected. If the concern should be with competence at the end of schooling, the importance of demanding that elementary school children excel at traditional scholastic performances can be doubted. That serious consideration be given to the fact that: (a) all of the formal learning now required (even though more than a third of the students never complete it) during elementary school can be accomplished in much shorter order during the intermediate years; and (b) that many students, given this delay, will eventually attain a higher level of accomplishment than they do now, is held to be supported by informed opinion and evidence. (Author/JM)

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INEQUALITY IN SCHOOL SUCCESS: THE NEGLECT OF INDIVIDUALS

by

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To overcome educational neglect, we may need to do more than attack its most visible manifestations; we may need to change some fundamental schooling policies and practices as well. The most visible signs of educational neglect are discrepancies between groups of students. We notice when the members of one sex, or one language, dialect, or cultural group succeed in school more often than others, and we protest when we find that instruction is mainly designed around the heritage of the successful groups. A sensible and compelling remedy for such injustice is to diversify instruction so that it respects each of the different legacies offered by all the groups in our society. Changes in this direction should not only reduce injustice but, in many cases, they should also reduce group inequalities in achieving school success. For example, if Spanish-speaking students were no longer required to learn English before learning anything else, their chances for success should increase dramatically. Thus, the goal of eradicating group disparities commands unqualified support.

But even this challenging mission doesn't promise to end all educational neglect, injustice and inequality because these maladies extend beyond group differences; they severely afflict individuals within groups as well. Inequalities in school success among individuals in this society are far larger than the inequalities among their groups, and it may be that the neglect of a student's group heritage, however visible, is only a fraction of the total educational neglect he or she suffers. To make these charges credible,

first we need to expose the magnitude of individual inequalities in school success, and second, try to identify the neglect responsible for them.

INDIVIDUAL INEQUALITIES

Despite their magnitude, individual inequalities in school success are difficult to define, and even more difficult to dramatize. By comparison, group inequalities are easy to display. A common way is to select two groups, such as white students from middle-class families and black students from poor families. The next step is to collect the marks teachers give to all the persons in each group for a variety of subjects like reading, language, science, arithmetic, and social studies. Then, for each of the groups, it is a simple matter to compute an average of the marks obtained in all these subjects. McCandless, Roberts, and Starnes followed this procedure with samples of seventh-grade students in Atlanta Public Schools and, in 1972, reported the results in the Journal of Educational Psychology: the average mark given to white students from middle-class families was approximately B minus while for black students from poor families it was C.

Discrepancies as large or larger than these usually emerge when either teacher marks or standardized test scores are collected and averaged for white students from prosperous backgrounds and black students whose families live in poverty. The absolute size of the discrepancies is usually smaller at earlier grades and much larger at later grades. In the case of standardized tests, the gap is so large by grade 12 that the average score for black students is more than three years behind that for white students.

By themselves, these discrepancies are distressing enough, but their consequences are even worse. Low grades and test scores in school go with high rates of unemployment, arrests for criminal activity, low incomes and all of the appalling side effects that come with these conditions. Thus, group discrepancies in school success can be seen as the source of gross inequalities in opportunities for living, and regarded this way, they have stimulated scathing critiques of schooling, the investment of unprecedented resources in improving the educability of poor and minority group members, and radical changes in social customs, as in the use of busing to achieve integration of schools.

But what of individual inequalities in school success? Since we all know of isolated instances where an individual student has been mistreated in school, the question is not if individual inequalities exist but if they occur on a scale large enough to merit our concern.

One way of answering the question is to examine the same data that we used to display group inequalities. For example, if we regard all teacher marks below C as a sign of failure to learn successfully, the results of the Atlanta study indicate that nearly 33% of the white students from middle-class homes do not succeed in school. Although the percentage is even higher for black students from poor families, almost 45%, the point remains that in the group for which our schools are most congruent, whites from middle-class homes, a third of the individuals do not achieve success.

To more fully appreciate the pervasiveness of failure among students in American public schools, it helps to convert these percentages to numbers representing individuals. Such numbers are estimates and to make them we must assume that the teacher marks reported for the Atlanta samples are

representative of the country at large. Because of this, the estimates cannot be precise, but even allowing a margin for error, huge numbers of individuals are involved. In 1969, according to the Bureau of Census, the number of white children from middle-class families (annual income between \$7,000 and \$15,000) was 32.4 million and the number of black children from poor families (annual income below \$5,000) was 3.6 million. Using the Atlanta information and defining school success as an average mark of C or higher, we can estimate that from these two groups alone, a total of 12.4 million children will not succeed in school.

Even the failure of more than 12 million children doesn't necessarily demonstrate individual inequalities in schooling. Not if most of the failure stems from group inequalities; that is, if most of the 12 million children were from minority groups or from poor families, their failure could be due to group inequalities in schooling. But, if the bulk of the children who fail come from a single group--a group that, on the average, does well in school--their failure would signal a large scale of individual inequality in achieving academic success. To decide, we can look at the estimates. Of the 12.4 million children who will probably fail to obtain teacher marks of C or better, approximately 10.8 million, or 87%, will be white and come from middle-class families. Within the group supposed to be the best prepared for schooling, more than 10 million will fail to achieve success; even in this group, individual inequalities are gross.

THE NEGLECT OF INDIVIDUALS

Whether the focus is the individual or the group, the meaning of educational neglect is essentially the same: a failure to tailor instruction

to the nature of the student. After all, a student's language, or dialect, or sex, or cultural heritage, as well as being shared with other members of a group, belongs to him or her as an individual. When instruction is designed and conducted without regard for differences in these characteristics, individuals, just as surely as groups, suffer educational neglect. The importance of a focus on individuals lies, in drawing our attention to characteristics of persons in addition to--not instead of--ones they share with other members of easily identified groups.

Undoubtedly, a very large number of neglected individual characteristics deserve attention, but as a start, we can begin with two of the obvious candidates: age and idiosyncrasy. In reality, 'age' is just a shorthand way of referring to a student's developmental level and all of the changes in capability that occur as he or she progresses toward maturity. The term 'idiosyncrasy' refers to all the differences among students in the areas of their strengths and weaknesses, and in the areas of their likes or dislikes. Far from being independent, age and idiosyncrasy intertwine; the areas of a person's strengths change with age and an individual's capabilities at a given age often depend on his preferences.

To illustrate the ways that schooling policies and procedures neglect to take account of age and idiosyncrasy, and the harm such negligence may inflict on students, let me recount part of a fable related by Harold Benjamin in his book, The Cultivation of Idiosyncrasy.

"....the wild creatures once had a school in the woods. All the animals had to take all the subjects. Swimming, running, jumping, climbing, and flying made up the required curriculum.

This was a school of no nonsense....It gave broad general training--and instruction--and education too.

Some animals, of course, were better students than others. The squirrel, for example, got A's from the first in running, jumping, and climbing. He got a good passing grade, moreover, in swimming...but he had trouble with flying. Not that he was unable to fly. He could fly. He climbed to the top of tree after tree and sailed through the air to neighboring trees with ease....The teacher of flying pointed out, however, that the squirrel was always losing altitude in his gliding and insisted that he should take off in the approved fashion from the ground. Indeed, the teacher decided that the taking-off-from-the-ground unit had to be mastered first, as was logical, and so he drilled the squirrel day after day on the take-off.

The flying teacher's practice in this case was in strict accord with the educational philosophy of the school. The teachers recognized that students would necessarily display great variations in their abilities. In the Woods Normal School, as a matter of fact, the teachers had learned a great deal about individual differences and the consequent tremendous ranges in human capacities. They set themselves doggedly, therefore, to the task of reducing these differences as best they might, that sane likenesses, safe unities, and normal conformities might prevail in the woods.

The squirrel tried hard. He tried so hard he got severe Charley horses in both hind legs, and thus crippled he became incapable even of running, jumping, or climbing. He left school a failure, and died soon thereafter of starvation, being unable to gather and store nuts. He was cheerful to the last....., regretting only the peculiar incapacity which had kept him from passing the course in flying."

The way I see our schools, the fate of many students is distressingly similar to that of the squirrel. In the elementary grades, especially during the primary years, the curriculum is almost rigidly fixed. We subject all students, beginning at the same age, to instruction in the same subjects--reading, writing, and arithmetic--provided in an invariant sequence. In doing so, we neglect both age and idiosyncrasy.

Far from acting on the possibility that some children learn the required subjects better when they are older, we impose the training at earlier and earlier ages. We seem to expect that developmental differences among children can be erased forever by extra training given at one early point in time. If a child is likely to fail in first grade, we use kindergarten and pre-school to impose intensive training in skills relevant to the demands he will face. In one sense, such training can be very effective; on the particular skills trained, the child may reach a level of performance equal to that of another child who has not required the extra help and we assume that the two kinds of children will be equally

able to benefit from schooling forever after.

Unfortunately, this assumption ignores some aspects of reality. One is that the skills necessary for meeting first grade demands are not sufficient to meet the demands in subsequent grades. Another is that the additional skills that will be needed later are not what is learned in the course of the first grade. For example, much of a first grader's time is spent in the practice of reading aloud fluently and he is regarded as successful if he learns to do so. In succeeding grades, however, he must be able to answer questions about the content of what he has read and a child needs very different skills to understand what he reads than to read aloud. In fact, reading aloud is probably antithetical to effective comprehension.

For some children, this situation presents little difficulty; they develop the skills necessary for second-grade success even though the school offers no specific instruction to them. These are the same children for whom special preschool training was not necessary. But other children, those who earlier required the preschool training in order to succeed in first grade, also have a critical need for specific instruction in the skills prerequisite for second-grade--for example, training in the skills that will later be necessary for comprehending written materials.

There is an obvious strategy for helping such children: during the first grade year, provide instruction not only in the regular first-grade curriculum, but also in the skills that will be necessary for success in the succeeding year. Unfortunately, the outcome of this strategy would be

that children singled out would have to learn, during every grade, much more than is required of children who fit the system: they would not only have to meet the regular demands made in each grade but they would have to learn all of the other skills prerequisite for successful learning in the next grade! Thus, we have a very peculiar solution, one that prescribes a greater load for children who find school difficult than for those who find it easy.

The aim of such solutions is to afford all children the maximum opportunity to benefit from schooling. The result, however, is that the solutions themselves may deprive vast numbers of children of the chance to learn and succeed in school. Consider an example. Suppose a child encounters difficulty, for whatever reason, in mastering school-prescribed learning tasks, whether in preschool or in the early primary grades. If the tasks are a major part of the curriculum as is the case with reading, the child's fate is to spend more rather than less of his day attempting to succeed with the task. In addition to a regular reading group, he is assigned for added help and practice to a special reading group, perhaps even to a remedial reading teacher. Furthermore, the longer he experiences difficulty in learning to read, as the squirrel did in flying, the greater the number of years he must spend in additional work on reading. Because there are a fixed number of hours in a school day, the more time the child must spend on tasks that are difficult for him, the less time he has to engage in other kinds of learning that he might enjoy and in which he might even succeed. Thus, a child identified as in need of special help, precisely because of the special help, has less opportunity to learn other things

than a child who is regarded as progressing normally, so that by the end of the third grade, he will be behind not only in reading, but in virtually every other school subject as well.

We often try to justify these ways of neglecting the developmental characteristics of children, but the rationale is weak. Even casual observation reveals that age makes a large difference in the success of learning. Imagine the difficulty a six year old would experience in learning to play a complicated game like chess and compare it with the relative ease with which a twelve year old could do so. The results of learning in school tell a similar story--sixth graders, on the average, read much better than first graders--but we attribute the improvement to the additional instruction the sixth graders have received, not to developmental changes in their capabilities. For the learning of school subjects it does seem logical to suppose that instruction is responsible for the higher levels of performance shown by older students. However, the relevant evidence, though admittedly weak, suggests the opposite. Studies of the relationship between age of school entry and later achievement rarely disclose any advantage for those who begin early; more often they show the contrary.

Most of the evidence from psychological research also runs against the penchant for imposing instruction as early as possible. Though in many cases the relation between school learning and the types of learning studied by psychologists is far from clear, the results of experimental work seem to show that, from memorization tasks to the learning of logical principles and even to the learning of a second language, the older the child, the better he does. Thus, at the least, it is conceivable that

our neglect of developmental characteristics imperils large numbers of our children.

Individual inequalities in school success may also stem from our neglect of idiosyncrasy. Student differences in the areas of their strengths and preferences are often quite dramatic. For example, an eleven year old's expert command of knowledge about professional baseball—lore, rules, player records and performance, present and past team location—may contrast sharply with his inability to master similar information about the geography of the United States. Unfortunately, there is little room for such idiosyncrasies in the context of schooling because formal education offers precious few options for learning, especially in the early grades. To excel, a child must display his prowess in either reading or arithmetic. Other subjects are available, of course, such as writing, spelling, social studies, and science, but achievement in one of these areas usually depends on success in reading. Even in the rare case where reading is not a prerequisite, a child who does well in another area while failing in reading is regarded as having a dim academic future. Furthermore, his chances of achieving expertise in another area are greatly diminished by the fact that he must spend inordinate amounts of time in attempting to improve his reading skills. As in the school for squirrels, mastery of the take-off preempts the learning of anything else.

Because of these ways of organizing school, we cannot exploit the possibility that provisions for age and idiosyncrasy might substantially improve the lot of millions of children. To oversimplify, our schools are congenial only for the kinds of children who have a bent for reading

and arithmetic, and who can profit from early formal instruction in these subjects. For the remainder of the population, school is a constant struggle dotted with repeated public notices of failure.

If we admit that there are large-scale individual inequalities in school success and the possibility that they partly stem from neglect of idiosyncracies and developmental differences, we can go on to debate the merits of alternative solutions. But we might be wasting our time unless we first confront a potential obstacle to change--the reason for our complacency about individual inequalities in our population groups. Perhaps the silence is due to an implicit commitment that directly contradicts the idea of erasing individual inequalities in schooling. Perhaps we believe in the essential goodness of individual inequalities. We seem to feel comfortable with the assumption that some persons have more talent than others and that those who are better should enjoy the fruits of their talent. After all, so the argument goes, if talent means the ability to perform difficult tasks well, it serves the society to insure the placement of talented people in positions where they can accomplish the difficult tasks. Even individual contentment and happiness should be served by barring untalented persons from positions beyond their capabilities, leaving these positions to the gifted. In general, public schooling in the United States appears well-suited to this view. The fact that 10 or 11 million middle-class children will fail to achieve success is actually comforting since it demonstrates that public schooling effectively separates talented from untalented persons. Far from causing general alarm, individual inequalities in schooling may be a source of support for a belief in the validity of the procedures of schooling.

Group inequalities, however, are a different story. They signify a breakdown in the procedures adopted for permitting talent to display itself. When disproportionate numbers of black students or students from poor families fail to attain success in school, our sense of justice is offended, we complain vocally, and we support programs aimed at righting an obvious wrong. Make no mistake, if all our different groups achieved the same average degree of school success, there would be little significant national alarm about schooling. Thus, the sad prospect: unless we abandon our commitment to the use of the schools as a major device for separating the more from the less talented, failure will continue to be the fate of millions of children.

Apart from humanitarian concern, there may be good reason for changing the major function of schooling from selection to education: schooling may be a very inaccurate selection device. If so, rather than serving society, the present system of public schooling may be thwarting the fulfillment of its needs.

It is difficult to determine the accuracy of schooling as a device for identifying the talent needed by our society because the educational system produces self-fulfilling prophecies. The criterion of occupational standing provides a good example. If schooling is an accurate selection device, those who succeed should end up in occupations that demand more talent and accord higher status than the jobs found by persons who do not succeed in school. By this test, of course, schooling is an extremely effective selection device indeed--only persons who have succeeded in law school, medical school, and engineering school become lawyers, doctors, engineers and so on. Success in these forms of schooling is a requirement

for entering the professions. Going back another step, success in college is usually a prerequisite for entering the professional schools, and those who succeed in college are generally the same ones who performed well in high school. Because admission to higher-status occupations depends on school success, schooling automatically becomes an accurate selection device--not necessarily because it is, but because it cannot fail to be.

A tentative way out of this circle is to ask a different question: among persons who have entered a given occupation, do those who received higher marks in school perform their jobs better than those who received lower marks? This approach has been used in several studies of the relationship between college grades and achievement in occupations such as non-technical business positions, teaching, engineering, medicine, and scientific research. After a review of virtually all the studies available up to 1965, Donald P. Hoyt concluded that the results were generally consistent "...in showing little or no relationship between academic success and various criteria of adult performance." Although studies like these are not conclusive, at the very least, they raise the possibility that the only talent schooling effectively identifies is the talent for succeeding in school itself.

There may be another reason for abandoning our commitment to selective education: it might turn out that to erase group inequalities completely, we will also have to solve the problem of individual inequalities. A simple assumption makes this possibility credible. One and the same source is partly responsible for both kinds of inequalities; that is, the rules, procedures, and requirements of schooling are appropriate for only a fraction

of the total population. Large numbers of children, black, white, brown, male and female, do not fit the demands and schedules of schooling. If the reasons for this are the same for children in all populations, then any solution of individual inequalities might reduce group inequalities as well.

OVERCOMING INDIVIDUAL NEGLECT

If we agree that the main goal of schooling should be education, not selection, we can examine some changes that might facilitate the development of all, rather than just a fraction of our children. It seems clear that the changes would have to be drastic. For one thing, this is because individual inequalities are so large and for another because more modest changes have been tried and, as yet, have failed to diminish inequalities very appreciably. So, to be effective, changes must be drastic, but they must be more--they must also be relevant to the academic demands that are made on children. Busing, for example, is widely regarded as a drastic solution to the problem of group inequalities in schooling. But it is also seen, and rightly so in many cases, as having only an accidental relationship to the quality of education. It does resolve one kind of inequity: it insures that children from all groups will encounter the same schooling demands and procedures. Unfortunately this may not be much help. If the destination of the bus is a school tailored to only a fraction of the children, the ride is hardly worth the trouble.

The drastic changes I have in mind relate to our neglect of idiosyncracies and developmental differences. What would schooling be like if it were

organized to capitalize on, instead of neglect, the idiosyncracies and developmental differences in our children? Its structure and procedures would need to be revised along several lines.

First among the revisions would be an explicit confession that the aim of schooling is to insure student achievement at the end rather than at the beginning of the educational process. Even though high school education surely needs reform as much as the elementary school, assume for the time being that the purpose of the early years is to prepare for success in high school. In the intermediate, or junior high school years, students would acquire the skills necessary to meet the demands of high school. In general, these demands would be for acquaintance with the conceptual structure, the methods, and the information produced by a variety of disciplines--mathematics, literature, physical and biological science, history and so on. Obviously, students will make choices within this array as well as among various types of work necessary to acquire the skills associated with clerical, mechanical and technical fields. Accordingly, the landmarks to be reached by the end of the intermediate school years--seventh, eighth, and ninth grades--consist of the prerequisites for these demands.

The prerequisites would be relatively small in number. Chief among the skills in which instruction should be offered are reading and arithmetic. The aim of reading instruction would be to assist students in learning to read rapidly and with comprehension, to foster the skills of gleaning relevant information from printed material as efficiently as possible. In arithmetic, the aim would be to help students in acquiring the fundamental concepts and computational skills of elementary mathematics--very much the same skills now required in the first six grades of elementary school.

Instruction would also be offered in a number of other areas. One of these would concern memorization and would include tactics for organizing material to increase its memorability. Assistance would be offered in the development of communication skills--interpreting and framing answers to questions, planning and preparing reports, exploiting information sources such as libraries and people, lucid expression of ideas orally and in writing. Finally, instruction should be provided to foster thinking and problem solving skills, including methods for generating and evaluating ideas, and mastery of each of these skills would be required of all.

Besides the various mandatory skills, instruction should also be available in a number of electives closely allied with particular disciplines. Students might practice various methods associated with scientific observation and experimentation, collect data on public opinion, learn interpersonal skills, acquire techniques of computer programming, attempt to teach younger children, conduct library research on topics of individual interest, analyze the structure, population, and sources of conflict in the local community, and so on. Although elective, instruction in these topics would be regarded as critical since it is here that students could realize and display their individual talents and interests.

Given a curriculum like this for the intermediate school, what would happen during the elementary years--the first six or seven grades of public school? This question can be answered by resolving the issue of what students need to be able to do in order to profit from the kind of schooling envisioned for the junior high school years. Here is where the proposed revision departs most obviously from the present structure of schooling. There would be no mandatory subjects--in the traditional sense--for the elementary school years. Reading competence would not be required since reading instruction would be offered in junior high. Nor would arithmetic

competence, nor competence in language arts, social studies and science.

No one of these achievements would be required of all students and no student would be expected to have achieved them all--or any single one of them, not even reading--by the time he enters the seventh grade. It would be the task of the intermediate school, not the elementary school, to look after formal mandatory instruction in these skills and disciplines.

But wouldn't such a scheme create major problems? As a seventh-grade girl in Iowa wrote to me, "I think your idea is kind of weird. Because all the time you are in school you wouldn't have anything to do. What would you do in school, play games? Or would you lie on the floor all day?" The answer is: No. There still would be substantial work to be done in elementary school. This work would be relevant for the demands of junior high, but, it would not supplant those demands by making them prematurely. The mandatory curriculum for elementary school would require that students select topics for study, do extended work on the topics, and succeed, where success refers to the quality and the completion of the work planned. The topics available for choice should range widely and include all of those that would be available at later grade levels--reading, math, history, geography, sciences and so on. Also, though, sufficient latitude should be given so that a student could select topics not usually included in public school curricula such as computer programming, wine making, or the lore of professional baseball. Opportunities to acquire interpersonal skills should also be made available, especially in view of the enormous amount of the child's time that is normally devoted to dealing with his relationships with teachers and other students. In general, the elementary school curriculum would be designed to afford children repeated

experiences of what work, and success in school, are like.

In an elementary school of the kind envisioned, the teacher would have three major functions: offering guidance in the selection of topics; providing encouragement and resources necessary for the child to pursue his work on a topic; and giving suggestions and support to aid the child in improving his work. With regard to the selection of topics, the guidance function would be extremely important as the teacher would need to determine whether a child had a reasonable chance of succeeding in his work. For example, if a child wished to learn to read, the teacher would need to insure that he or she could do so without failing so often as to defeat the purpose of the elementary years.

The task of providing encouragement would not be onerous, but that of making resources available could be quite demanding. Here the teacher would need curriculum materials that could be used by an elementary school child without substantial adult guidance; and that did not presuppose skills in other unrelated subjects. For example, curriculum materials for work on scientific topics should not require extensive reading skills. This standard can be met, as demonstrated in the elementary school science curriculum developed under the auspices of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Lastly, the function of giving assistance to the child in improving his work would replace the present practices of grading him and of using standardized tests of achievement to determine his progress. Plainly, under the system of schooling envisioned, such methods of evaluating students would be inapplicable since the work of elementary school students would be so diverse that standardized tests would not be feasible. Instead, the method of suggestions for improvement would both encourage and stimulate the child to produce completed work of high quality.

A two-part rationale can be given for revising schooling in this manner. First, there is reason to hope that the type of elementary school envisioned would significantly diminish, if not completely remove, the experience of academic failure in the lives of young children. This should allow virtually all children to embark on the intermediate years of formal instruction with a genuine attraction to learning, rather than the fear and hostility that so many children bring to those years at present. As Lloyd Humphreys, a professor of psychology and education at the University of Illinois, has written, "By the end of the sixth grade it is better that a child like science than that he know a great deal about science." Elsewhere, I recently advanced a similar view: "...current schooling practices often result in 'intellectually burned' students, that is, children who, by the time they complete elementary school, have experienced frustration and failure so repetitiously that they view themselves as incapable of intellectual competence and see learning as incapable of affording them any satisfaction, much less real joy."

The second part of the rationale rests on a dual proposition: that all of the learning necessary for success in meeting high school demands can be accomplished in only two or three years--the junior high school years; and that delaying the beginning of prescribed instruction until those years will, for many children, increase the ultimate degree of academic success they can achieve. Referring to the topics of arithmetic, history, and science, Humphreys has asserted that, "Subject matter knowledge or skills in these areas is not a necessary, perhaps not even a useful, goal for the first six grades...Formal teaching, or learning of arithmetic can be delayed until the seventh grade, and all of the learning required for starting high school mathematics can be accomplished by the end of the eighth grade." Apart from the feasibility of delaying traditional academic demands until

junior high school, David Elkind, a psychologist noted for his contributions to the study of child development, has commented on the possible advantages of such delays. After citing results of research on intellectual development, Elkind wrote, "This data suggests the hypothesis that the longer we delay formal instruction, up to certain limits, the greater the period of plasticity and the higher the ultimate level of achievement. There is at least as much evidence and theory in support of this hypothesis as there is in favor of the early instruction proposition."

Despite these testimonials, there is no real proof that the system of schooling I have sketched would solve the problem of individual inequalities. But advance proof is not the issue. In fact, the only way to obtain proof is to try the system, so the real issue is whether or not the rationale is plausible enough to warrant a tryout. Overall, I think it is.

The case for a system of schooling that is responsive to the truly astonishing idiosyncratic and developmental differences among students consists of several parts. To begin with, the need for a major change in schooling is evident: Far too large a proportion of the population fails in school. This pervasive amount of failure cannot be ascribed entirely to problems of cultural difference--well over two-thirds of those whose destiny is school failure are white students from middle-class homes. Accordingly, a decision must be made: either to accept massive amounts of school failure as inevitable, or to change the schools.

If we reject the inevitability of large-scale failure, the question is: What changes should be made? It seems advisable to start by exploiting, rather than neglecting, obvious sources of variation in academic performance, two of

which are age and idiosyncrasy. With regard to age, if we admit that our concern should be with competence at the end of schooling rather than at the end of the first grade, we can doubt the importance of demanding that elementary school children excel at traditional scholastic performances. In reading, for example, we can wonder at the absurdity of requiring young children to spend from two to four years mastering the art of reading aloud—especially when they will have to spend the rest of their lives unlearning it in order to read effectively. Next, we can seriously consider informed opinion and evidence, (however sparse) to the effect that: (a) all of the formal learning we now require (even though more than a third of our students never complete it) during elementary school can be accomplished in much shorter order during the intermediate years; and (b) that many students, given this delay, will eventually attain a higher level of accomplishment than they do now.

Accepting these possibilities, we are free to redesign elementary and early childhood education so that children can work in specialized areas of particular fascination to them. Since all children can learn effectively, the range of options in such a system could be wide enough to provide every child with repeated experiences of success. The expected result is that children would encounter the formal demands of the intermediate years with a taste for academic learning and an appreciation for the joy of completing it successfully.

Thus, the argument is that we should solve the fundamental problem of individual inequalities in school success. Individual inequalities exist because present forms of schooling serve only a fraction of the different individuals in our population and because of the absurdity that precociousness in young children sets the standard for school success. Inequalities persist

because of our neglect, our failure to appreciate the developmental strength and the idiosyncracies of our children. This we can change, and I think we should.